

## **Cal/EPA Environmental Justice Action Plan**

### **Pilot Project Summary on Water New River (Calexico)**

**May 18, 2005**

- I. Lead Agency:** State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB)
- II. Project Area:** The New River from California/Mexico Border at the City of Calexico, through the Imperial Valley and north to the Salton Sea.

**Area Demographics:** The Imperial Valley is a rural, desert and farming geographic region extending from the U.S./Mexico border at the City of Calexico (population 36,000) northward toward the Salton Sea. It is located 100 miles east of San Diego and about 20 miles west of Yuma, Arizona.

The 2003 US Census estimates the population in Imperial County to be 149,232 of which 75 percent are of Mexican decent; 68 percent speak a language other than English at home; 32 percent are under the age of 18; 33 percent are foreign born; and household per capita income is \$13,239.

Imperial County has one of the highest unemployment rates in the state with over 26 percent and school dropout rates at about 20 percent. The Census Bureau estimates show over a third of the residents in the county lack health insurance.

**Background:** The New River has been recognized as a significant pollution problem since at least the late 1980s, primarily because of its extremely high concentrations of fecal coliform bacteria and stench at its entry point into the United States in the City of Calexico, California. As it flows northward and drains into the Salton Sea, the New River accumulates large quantities of agricultural runoff, contributing to the Salton Sea's high salinity and nutrient levels. The New River channel has for decades been a serious environmental and health problem needing urgent attention. Over the last 50 years, there has been fragmented efforts by the community to address this problem, but Imperial County has not had the economic and political clout or the community organization power to bring expedient solution to the issue.

The Calexico New River Committee, Inc. (CNRC), a private non-profit corporation founded in 2001, is a citizen's group that has moved toward addressing this complex problem. Since its inception, the CNRC has been able to harness enthusiastic support from the community and obtained pledged support from appointed and elected officials. The CNRC is a organization comprised of community members and leaders that represent various segments of the population: The Chairman of the Committee, Rudy Maldonado, serves in the Board of Directors of Division 5 of the Imperial Irrigation District; Javier Alatorre works in the Imperial County Assessors Office and is the former Mayor of the City of Calexico; Jose Carrillo is a Coordinator with the County of Imperial Public Health department; Luis Estrada

is the Supervisor of the Waste Water Treatment Plant and interim Director of Development Services for the City of Calexico; Ray Falcon is Trustee for the Heffernan Memorial Hospital District; Aida Gates is the Imperial County Representative for Senator Denise Moreno-Ducheny; Jose Lopez is the Executive Director of Campesinos Unidos, Inc., a non-profit organization; Stephen Martin, Agent-In-Charge of the U.S. Border Patrol, El Centro Station; Eduardo Niebla is a Chemistry Instructor at the Imperial Valley College; and Jose M. Rodriguez Jr. is the Imperial County Assessor. All of them are Calexico residents.

**Project Need.** It is believed there are a variety of health impacts to the adult and children populations living along the New River from the Mexico/California border to the Salton Sea. According to the Colorado River Basin Regional Water Quality Control Board, the New River's source of pollution is waste primarily from agricultural chemical runoff from the area's farm industry (69.6%), however, human waste (29%) from the ever-expanding population in Mexicali (population 800,000) has the most impact in populated areas. Additional pollution of the New River is attributed to manufacturing plants operating in Mexico (1.4%).

Also, according to the Regional Board's monitoring data, the New River contains a stew of about 100 biological contaminants, volatile organic compounds, heavy metals, and pesticides including DDT, PCB, selenium, uranium, arsenic and mercury. Levels for many of these contaminants are in violation of U.S. EPA and Cal/EPA standards. In addition, pathogens and toxins have been found in the New River which cause tuberculosis, encephalitis, polio, cholera, hepatitis and typhoid, all flowing untreated through the City of Calexico. Toxic foam from the New River blows into parking lots of one of the commercial centers and toward the downtown area on rainy and windy days. Impacts of the New River are experienced most in Calexico where a continuous noxious odor is extremely noticeable, especially during the evening and early morning, and above all throughout the summer months. The problem is expected to worsen for Calexico as Mexicali's population continues to expand and the water quality problems are not effectively addressed.

**Socio-economic Impacts.** Although the impacts of the New River can be seen throughout the City of Calexico, it is the Westside of Calexico has suffered most from direct exposure to the river, resulting in adjacent properties being undeveloped and economic growth in the area becoming stagnant.

**Regional Advisory Group.** In 2004, the CNRC requested that the State Water Resources Control Board consider the New River as an EJ Action Plan pilot project. The CNRC members specifically requested assistance in addressing the growing environmental concerns with the New River explaining they have been met with support and opposition at varying levels of government.

This proposed environmental justice pilot project seeks to establish a Regional Advisory Group comprised of community members, local, Tribal and federal government representatives representing the CNRC, Imperial Valley, the State of California, the Torres Martinez Tribe, US EPA, and members of the Mexican government. This Regional Advisory Group will be charged with reviewing available health data focused primarily at

children, the potential tools that can be used to measure cumulative impacts of pollutants in the River, and taking inventory of prior precautionary approaches considered or documented. Through this group, and with input from the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) and the California Integrated Waste Management Board (CIWMB), methods will be explored to conduct cumulative impacts analysis and identify gaps in the application of existing precautionary approaches and propose alternatives as appropriate.

**III. Project Start Date:** June 2005

**IV. Project End Date:** December 2006

**V. Goal & Objectives:**

**a. Goal:** To develop a children's risk reduction plan where tools to best assess cumulative impacts will be identified and inventory of precautionary approach will be essential by establishing common guidelines for public participation, especially among impacted groups.

**b. Objectives:**

- Establish a Regional Advisory Group comprised of community, government and Tribal members impacted by decisions or activities along the New River who meet on a regular basis during the pilot project.
- Identify best methods for maximizing public and Tribal participation.
- Research and provide available health data for the Regional Advisory Group to review and identify tools to conduct cumulative impact analysis.
- Research and inventory all tried or proposed precautionary approaches.
- Develop and implement a children's environmental risk reduction plan
- Evaluate existing and as necessary, establish new long-term strategies to reduce farm runoff contaminants.
- Evaluate existing and as necessary, establish new long-term strategies to work with the Mexican government to reduce raw sewage flows in the New River.

**VI. Activities – Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, & Deliverables**

**Planning**

- **Site Selection:** The New River has been regarded as the most polluted river in the United States, and has had this distinction since the 1980s. Many previous efforts have

been made to reduce pollutants on both sides of the US/Mexico border, with little or no progress as shown by water quality data for the New River at the border with Mexico. As the region grows, the need for a healthy environment has become essential, and a priority among residents, especially those in the City of Calexico. At the initiative stage is the CNRC that has actively pursued support from federal and state government officials in identifying methods to resolve this problem. The CNRC approached the State Water Resources Control Board requesting assistance in resolving pollution problems in the New River. It's high minority and low-income population identifies the region as an environmental justice community as defined in statute. In addition, the work already compiled by the Colorado River Basin Regional Water Quality Control Board assists in expediting the gathering of essential data.

- **Reduction of Risk to Children's Health:** Through the assistance of the established Regional Advisory Group, the SWRCB will be taking a two-prong approach in determining children's risks: 1) Review existing health data and identify if a correlation exists between children illnesses and toxins found in the New River; 2) Review existing data and identify the most common type of children's illnesses that correlate with a specific form of pollutant (or media).

Based on the findings, strategies to reduce the risk of children's health will be identified, including:

1. Increasing awareness among parents and children of the health hazards posed by the New River or other media;
2. The reduction of contaminants now introduced into the New River; and,
3. The remediation of the most impaired waterways as determined to have the highest adverse effect on human health.

Success of these efforts will be measured through the successful cooperation of impacted communities and Tribes, and through tracking health data.

- **Cal/EPA Cross-Media Implication:** Although the initial focus of this pilot project is on water, the SWRCB will work with other Cal/EPA Boards, Departments, and Office to identify cross-media opportunities as the project proceeds. At present, water, pesticides, land, and air are potential media. In addition, direction for cumulative impacts and precautionary approaches will be obtained from the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment and the Integrated Waste Management Board, respectively.
- **Partnerships:** There are several existing organizations now supporting this effort. However, partnerships need to be developed with various governmental entities and Tribes, as follows: Imperial County; Cities of Brawley, Imperial, El Centro, Westmoreland, Salton City, Salton Sea Beach and Desert Shores; Torres Martinez Tribe; USEPA; Department of Health Services; Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment; Air Resources Board; Department of Pesticide Regulation; Department of Agriculture; Department of Fish and Game; and, Department of Water Resources.

## **Implementation**

- **Methodology & Performance Indicators:** The SWRCB will work closely with the Regional Advisory Group and respective government, Tribal, and private health and education professionals to identify methodologies and performance indicators through open discussions and presentations at regular meetings. The Regional Advisory Group will identify tools for cumulative impact analysis and inventory precautionary approaches tried and propose options as appropriate.
- **Public Participation:** Best practices guidelines will be used for public participation at the Regional Advisory Group public meetings. All meetings will be conducted on a regular basis where data will be presented, discussion encouraged and recommendations made. All decisions will require public input prior to implementation.
- **Project Work Plan & Timeline:**

	Activity	Start Date	End Date
<b>Phase 1</b>	1. Identify pilot project location(s)	Completed	1 <sup>st</sup> Qtr 2005
	2. Define project parameters	Completed	1 <sup>st</sup> Qtr 2005
<b>Phase 2</b>	1. Establish Regional Advisory Group	3 <sup>rd</sup> Qtr 2005	Ongoing
	2. Collect project data	3 <sup>rd</sup> Qtr 2005	4 <sup>th</sup> Qtr 2005
	3. Evaluate data and write report	4 <sup>th</sup> Qtr 2005	1 <sup>st</sup> Qtr 2006
<b>Phase 3</b>	1. Develop Children's Environmental Risk Reduction Plan (ChERRP)	2 <sup>nd</sup> Qtr 2006	2 <sup>nd</sup> Qtr 2006
<b>Phase 4</b>	1. Implement ChERRP	3 <sup>rd</sup> Qtr 2006	Ongoing
<b>Phase 5</b>	1. Evaluate ChERRP	4 <sup>th</sup> Qtr 2006	Ongoing
	2. Explore implementation options of project	1 <sup>st</sup> Qtr 2007	Ongoing

## **Evaluation & Deliverables**

- **Results:**
  - A Children's Environmental Risk Reduction Plan will be completed by December 2006.
  - Health data will be collected from the Imperial County Health Department as well as the State Department of Health Services.
  - The Regional Advisory Group will be established early June 2005, with the first meeting scheduled for August 2005. The Regional Advisory Group will be asked if additional surveys should be conducted, and discuss possible ways for assessing cumulative impacts and precautionary approaches; and recommend options.
  - Tracking the number of illnesses among children from viruses related to the New River;
  - Testing water fowl and fish to assess ingestion of PCBs or mercury.
  - Testing the New River at various points to assess contamination types and levels.
- **Deliverables:**
  - Establishment of a Regional Advisory Group representative of the Imperial Valley;
  - Development & implementation of Children's Risk Reduction Plan (ChERRP) including:
    - A successful awareness campaign in Spanish and English;
    - School instruction materials
    - Public service announcements
  - Approaches toward the reduction of contaminants in the New River; and,
  - A bi-national approach toward reducing flow of untreated sewage into the United States at the City of Calexico.
- **Considerations, Anticipated Challenges/Constraints:** Potential challenges to this project include: ensuring appropriate resources; resolving community conflicts; obtaining support from farmers; and, addressing international sensitivities.

**VII. For More Information:**

**Comments, Questions, or Concerns regarding this Pilot?**

Please direct comments, questions, or concerns to:

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